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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ROUNDUP: QAMISHLI VIOLENCE?; DAMASCUS
DECLARATION GROUP DENOUNCES MEPI FUNDING; UN HUMAN RIGHTS
VISIT; NEW WAVE OF ARRESTS

REF: A) DAMASCUS 701 B) DAMASCUS 644

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) CONTACTS DISMISS PRESS REPORTS OF KURDISH CLASHES
WITH ARMY: Kurdish contacts dismissed press reports that an
armed clash, resulting in many Kurdish injuries, had taken
place in the northeastern city of Qamishli between Syrian
armed forces and members of the PKK-affiliated Democratic
Union Party on February 26. In separate accounts, both
Luqman Ois of the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights, as well
as human rights lawyer and Yekiti Party activist Faisl Badr
told Poloff that police had fired on unidentified men who had
been spray-painting anti-SARG graffiti on a wall, but that no
one had been injured. Ois was unsure whether the reports of
injuries had stemmed from the SARG or Kurdish sources. Badr,
who had travelled to Qamishli March 2, dismissed the reports
on March 5, calling them politically motivated and part of a
government-staged campaign. Ois added that the SARG security
presence in Qamishli had been increasing in preparation for
the March 1 trial of 50 Kurds involved in the June 2005
Khaznawi riots (NOTE: The March 1 trial was adjourned with
no new court date set. END NOTE), the March 8 anniversary of
the imposition of Emergency Rule, the March 12 anniversary of
the 2004 Qamishli riots, and the March 21 celebration of
Kurdish New Year.

12. (C) DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP PUBLICLY DENOUNCES MEPI
FUNDING: The Damascus Declaration group publicly denounced
the new MEPI funding project on February 27, ten days after
voting to condemn it (ref A). In a statement to Reuters,
Declaration member Hassan Abdulazeem said that the
Declaration Group "had enough resources" to continue its own
campaign for peaceful change and to end the Ba'th Party's
monopoly on power, and that accepting international financing
"means subordination to the funding country." Abdulazeem
was particularly critical of the U.S.'s offer of financial
support while economic sanctions are in place against Syria.
"Our project is nationalist, independent democratic change in
Syria, not through occupation nor economic pressures we see
the United States doing," said Abdulazeem.

13. (C) CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS REFLECT ON VISIT BY UN HIGH
COMMISSION: Civil society activists report mixed results from
the February 12-16 visit of Frej Fenniche, Acting
Representative for the Arab Region of the UN's High
Commissioner for Human Rights, to Damascus. Fenniche and his
team met with a range of Syrian officials including the
Ministers of Expatriates, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as
well as Deputy PM for Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari, and
with officials in the Ministries of Information, Justice, and
Social Affairs and Labor. Fenniche also met with

representatives of the bar association and the journalists, syndicate, organizations heavily dominated by the SARG and the Ba'th Party. Human rights activists praised the symbolism of Fenniche's visit and his efforts on behalf of a number of civil society activists, including Riad Seif, Mamoun al-Homsi, and Nejati Tayyara who were briefly detained during his visit.

14. (C) Some activists, however, felt that a roundtable discussion held February 14, which included SARG officials, activists, and the UN delegation, was too heavy on symbolism and not substantive enough. Activist participants included representatives from the Human Rights Association of Syria (HRAS) and the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, as well as individual activists Aktham Naisse and Michel Kilo, among others. A number of prominent human rights activists like Anwar al-Bunni and representatives of the human rights organizations Arab Organization for Human Rights and SWASIAH were not invited. HRAS founder Haithem al-Maleh, a roundtable participant, noted that while the roundtable meant that the SARG had implicitly recognized the human rights groups, he found that the format for the three-hour session did not allow participants to discuss issues in-depth.

15. (C) FOUR MORE STUDENT ACTIVISTS ARRESTED: Following the arrest and continued detention of student activists Husam Ali Milhim and Ali Nadhir Ali in late January (ref B), four more activists belonging to the same group have been detained, all by Air Force Security. Tariq al-Ghurani was detained February 18, while Maher Isber Ibrahi, Ayham Sager, and Alaam Fakhur were arrested February 23. All six students were involved in organizing the secular youth discussion group Forum for Syria "The Sun" (Al-Shams). Meanwhile, Omar Abdullah, son of Atassi Forum activist and former political detainee Ali Abdullah and a friend of the detained students,

continues to be summoned for daily interviews by Air Force Security. According to Abudullah's brother Mohammed, Omar arrives at the Air Force Security branch at 7 AM and is released at 10 PM each day. In an interrogation session on March 2, Omar had been blindfolded and had heard the screams of his friends. Authorities then removed Omar's blindfold to reveal Maher Isber Ibrahi, who was chained to a wall and had bruises across his chest from beating with sticks, said Mohammed.

16. (C) SON OF JAILED ACTIVIST ARRESTED IN FRONT OF STATE SECURITY COURT: Mohammed Riad ad-Drar, the 19-year-old son of jailed civil society activist Riad Hammoud ad-Drar, was arrested on March 5 by Political Security Directorate (PSD) agents in front of the Supreme State Security Court. Mohammed ad-Drar had been carrying and passing out leaflets calling for his father's release at the time of his arrest. According to human rights activists who were at the scene at the time of the arrest, young ad-Drar was taken to the al-Fayha branch of PSD. Riad ad-Drar has been imprisoned since June 2005 after he delivered an anti-SARG sermon at the funeral of slain Kurdish civil society activist and Sunni religious leader Sheikh Mashook al-Khaznawi. His lawyers submitted a written defense on his behalf on March 5. Riad ad-Drar's next trial date is April 2.

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